

Singapore Warns on Violence After Riot in Indian District

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has ordered an inquiry into Singapore's first riot in four decades as tensions rise over the reliance on foreign workers in the city state.

"There is no excuse for such violent and criminal behavior," Lee said in a statement today. A Committee of Inquiry will look into the reasons for the riot and how it was handled, and review how the government manages areas where foreign workers congregate, he said.

The riot, which broke out last night in the Little India district after a traffic accident, involved about 400 people, the police force said in a statement on its Facebook page today.

Police arrested 24 Indian nationals, 2 Bangladeshi nationals and a Singaporean permanent resident, it said. About 300 officers responded to the riot with 22 police officers and 5 auxiliary officers hurt, the police said, adding that all the officers were later released from hospital.

Discontent in Singapore over foreign workers has risen after years of open immigration spurred complaints on social media about congestion and infrastructure strains at a time of widening income inequality. A four-year government campaign to encourage companies to employ fewer overseas workers has in turn led to a labor shortage, prompting some companies to seek cheaper locations.

The riot was "a new thing, that's definitely a watershed of a kind," Bilveer Singh, an associate professor at National University of Singapore's department of political science, said by phone. "I don't think we have seen this for decades now."

Driver Arrested

The violence began after a bus ran over and killed a 33-year-old Indian national worker, Deputy Commissioner of Police T. Raja Kumar said last night in a briefing. The bus driver, a 55-year-old Singaporean, has been arrested for causing death by negligent act and is assisting with investigations, the police said in a separate statement on Facebook today.

Vehicles damaged during the riot, including 16 police vehicles, were removed, the police said. The situation was brought under control within an hour and officers did not fire any weapons during the incident, the police said in an earlier statement on Facebook.

Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew, a member of parliament for the district, said in a post on his Facebook page that he will look into limiting liquor licenses within the Little India area.

"In perspective, this is a spontaneous act. It is not something politically motivated. At a broad, strategic level, it is something new after a long time," Singh from NUS said. The government would need to act sternly against those who rioted, he said. "The future insecurities of Singapore are one, internal, two, important. Singaporeans won't tolerate this because Singaporeans are becoming very nationalistic."

Foreign Workers

Large-scale demonstrations have been almost unknown in Singapore since race riots in 1964 killed 36 people and contributed to the island's ouster from the federation with Malaysia. Singapore and Malaysia were united from 1963 to 1965. Clashes between the Chinese and Malay communities culminated in race riots in 1969 in Malaysia, which spilled briefly into Singapore. After the violence of the 1960s the Singapore government imposed curbs on public assembly.

The city's income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient widened last year, according to the Statistics Department. The central bank forecasts inflation will probably be 2.5 percent to 3 percent this year and the island is the world's third-most expensive Asian city to live in, according to an Economist Intelligence Unit ranking.

Bus Strike

"We shouldn't assume that the kind of issues that the local population faces, like the cost of living, would not affect the foreign worker population," said Leong Chan-Hoong, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore. "Most of them will get a very decent wage but a very small minority may not and maybe this is the minority group that happened to be there at the wrong place at the wrong time."

As part of its effort to reduce imported labor, the government said in February that companies must pay higher levies for lower-skilled foreign employees over the next two years and cut the proportion of overseas workers in some industries. In 2012, the National Wages Council recommended raising the pay of low-wage Singaporean workers as their income growth had lagged the rest of the workforce for the past decade.

In November last year, Singapore authorities charged four Chinese nationals over their involvement in an illegal strike that led to a disruption in some bus services, an unusual public display of labor discord. Singapore is currently hosting ministers from 12 nations such as the U.S. and Australia for the final round of talks this year on the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade accord.

The government "will not tolerate" such acts, deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said at a briefing last night on the riot. Those involved will be dealt with "firmly, fairly, strictly, according to the law," said Teo.

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